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ABSTRACT

A 20-item checklist is provided for parents assessing the quality of day care programs. Items include the following: (1) caregivers nourish children with body snuggling; (2) caregivers arrange safe, interesting learning experiences; (3) caregivers are keen observers; (4) child health and safety needs are met; (5) teachers encourage competency; (6) language games and book reading are daily activities for all ages; (7) caregivers know how to recognize "the teachable moment" and use it; (8) caregivers are sensitive to the rhythms and tempos of each child; (9) lots of sturdy toys and equipment are available; (10) music, art, and drama activities are appreciated and offered to children; (11) adults have sufficient energy for working with little children; (12) curriculum and program are planned and plans are available; (13) the program is flexible; (14) caregivers are positive role models; (15) parents are considered partners of the center, not nuisances; (16) caregivers are good "matchmakers" and "dance developmental ladders" well; (17) the child-care facility is tuned into community resources; (18) caregivers continue to learn about child development; (19) caregivers know and use a lot of positive discipline techniques; and, (20) the environment feels happy. A brief explanation of each item is provided. (RH)

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Choosing a Quality Child Care Center: Help for Parents

Nowadays as more and more working families search for child care, concerns are strong about the quality as well as availability of care. Child development theories, researches, and successful programs provide excellent ideas about the human and environmental ingredients that can ensure high quality care (Honig, 1979; 1987b). What should parents ask about and look for in choosing high quality center care?

Directors and staff will of course be able to provide a handbook of regulations and information about: what age children the center serves; what the costs are; how long the waiting list is and how children are chosen from that list; what hours the center is open; how many years of experience caregivers have; sample menu plans; daily curriculum plans; and even what penalties are required of parents who are late at closing time.

Most parents, however, have a not-so-hidden agenda as they ask the "how much" and "how long" types of questions. Parents want reassurance that their child will be safe, happy, well-cared for, and learning (Honig, 1987a). A director can describe the educational qualifications of staff members, but some parents may themselves not be too sure of what to look for on a visit to a child care facility. Some parents may even be overly impressed by an identical row of baskets or ditto-sheet art work that children have made as "presents" for parents. Yet the most

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important ingredients for quality child care are nurturing caregivers.

Post the following list of characteristics of a quality child-care program to help parents become well-informed child care consumers in deciding that your facility is indeed a choice kind of place to enroll their child.

Parent Checklist for Quality Child Care

The following twenty qualities are easy to look for when you visit a child-care center that is developmentally caring as well as a good place for your infant, toddler, or preschooler to learn.

1. Caregivers nourish children with body snuggling.

   Children get back rubs, pats, and tender smiles at nap times and other times. Babies who cry and preschoolers who are distressed are picked up and helped. They are not left to cry. Blankets and soft, cuddly toys are available. Teachers accept calmly that children stroke their skin with a security blanket and suck thumbs when they are fretful, tired or lonesome. Tolerance for toilet learning and ease in accepting messy eating are signs of caregiver emotional generosity. Adult laps and hugs are free for the asking.

2. Caregivers arrange safe, interesting learning experiences.

Caregivers provide learning opportunities and games appropriate for each child's age and abilites. There are private spaces and opportunities for quiet play and for noisier play, for water play and dry-toy play. There are outdoor spaces in which to run, jump, slither, climb, swing, and trike ride. Indoor spaces are organized for discovering and learning, for rest, for sociable play, and for pretend play. Book spaces invite children to plunk down with picture books on comfortable couches or cushions.

3. Caregivers are keen observers.

Good noticing skills are a sign of a high quality caregiver. Teachers notice when a child drifts and wanders and needs redirection to an interesting, enjoyable activity. Good noticers never permit scapegoating or hurting by any child in the center against a "victim." Caregivers in a quality center seem to have eyes in the back of their heads. They watch what children are doing so that they can respond to a child's needs and prevent troubles. They are available promptly if a child needs comfort, help, an answer to a question, an idea for another way to play with a toy. The perceptive noticer senses when help

would be intrusive and lets a youngster feel pride in struggling with a difficult but doable task.

4. Child health and safety needs are met.

The environment is kept safe, clean, and protected. There are no hidden dangers, such as slippery carpets, open stairways, sharp table edges at eye level, or cleaning products left in floor-level cabinets. Handwashing procedures are conscientiously carried out during diapering or toileting procedures (U.S.D.H.H.S., 1984). Teachers are trained in first aid, in signs of child abuse, and in the use of simple screening techniques such as Caldwell's Preschool Inventory or Frankenberg's Denver Developmental Screening Test.

Healthful foods are served that meet the four daily food group requirements. Iron deficits can cause irritability and lower I.Q. in young children (Honig & Oski, 1986).

5. Teachers encourage competency.

High quality programs do not just provide custodial care. Children are lured to try new activities. They are encouraged to work at self-help skills, such as dressing oneself. Children feel proud to be helpers at clean-up and mealtimes. Teachers

encourage and express pleasure at children's good work efforts.

6. Language games and book reading are daily activities for all ages.

With babies, caregivers talk cheerfully while diapering. When new words are taught, pictures, toys, dolls, and actions are often used. Children's questions are answered cheerfully and turn-taking conversations are particularly encouraged (Honig, 1985). Open-ended questions are asked as well as those that expect just one right answer. Books are abundant. Reading to children is a natural, often-to-be-seen activity.

7. Caregivers know how to recognize the "teachable moment"--and use it.

Adults who care for young children are kept very busy, yet many know the secret of embedding learning games and conversations in the daily routines they carry out. If a toddler drops a mitten, that is a good time to teach the concept of two mittens for two hands. If a toddler wants more peas, teachers provide the words. If a ball rolls behind a chair, a teacher asks, "Where did the ball go?" and gets a child to think about

spatial relationships and to create hypotheses about causal relationships.

8. Caregivers are sensitive to the rhythms and tempos of each child.

Children are greeted warmly and personally when they arrive. They are not nagged at nor expected to compete with each other in eating big portions or solving hard puzzles. Each child is accepted as a special person who may have a learning style different from others. Teachers use special techniques, such as giving lots of advance notice, and singing or chanting what will happen next, to help children adjust to transition times.

9. Lots of sturdy toys and equipment are available.

Children need a variety of materials that do something when acted upon, such as squeeze and stack and wind-up toys, blocks, puzzles, clay, and paints. Toy variety encourages problem-solving, growth of dexterity, and creative imagination. Climbers and slides stimulate muscular adventurousness, graceful body coordination, good appetite, and good spirits.

10. Music, art, and drama activities are appreciated and offered to children.

Even babies bounce beautifully to music. When happy and cheerful, children will hum and sing to themselves. They enjoy poems, rhymes, songs, dancing and moving to music, clapping and swaying and using safe music makers. With dress-up clothes, and a playhouse corner, children can organize elaborate sociable games with peers.

11. Adults have enough energy for little children.

Quality caregivers do not just stand around and supervise nor gossip with other grownups. They engage children in joint shared activities, and planfully set up learning activities. Coffee breaks and a climate of respect and appreciation for staff keep good will and a sense of humor going even when tots are tired and days are long.

12. Curriculum and program are planned and the plans are available.

Program includes cognitive thinking activities, creative aesthetic activities (such as playdough and finger paint), opportunities to increase hand-eye coordinations, and toys to play with that promote ideas about space and quantity and causality. Adults specifically promote

prosocial goals - friendliness, cooperation, and kindness among the children (Honig, 1982b).

13. The program is flexible.

Opportunities exist for special events, such as a trip to a local park or a visit from a parent bringing a tame family pet. Some days nothing goes as well as usual. When meals are late, tired children may not be able to cope well. A flexible attitude shrugs off days when unexpected troubles, such as a clogged sink or a hamster's escape from his cage have caused some commotion.

14. Caregivers are positive role models.

Adults model courtesy, patience, empathy, and interest in learning. Children in turn become curious, persistent learners and polite, concerned, and helpful citizens when their special grownups act that way.

15. Parents are considered partners, not nuisances.

Parents are encouraged to share their knowledge and concerns about the child with the staff, are invited for conferences, and can visit the center anytime. When parents are overtired at day's end, jealous of a toddler's affection for a caregiver, then caregivers in a high quality

program know how to use "active listening" skills (Gordon, 1970) to help a parent feel better or more competent. Suppose a child cries when a parent comes at pick-up time. The perceptive caregiver assures that parent: "How special you are! Natalie is so excited to see you that her emotions just spill over into tears."

16. Caregivers are good "matchmakers" and "dance developmental ladders" well.

Quality caregivers understand child development. Tasks are provided that whet a child's appetite for learning and are neither too difficult nor too boring and easy. When they make new demands for learning, quality caregivers may expect much, but they match the level of difficulty of the new task to each child's skill level, interests, and abilities. They lure the child forward with just enough of a challenge, enough encouragement to keep interest high, yet enough flexibility to dance back down when a new learning task proves too stressful at this time for this child. Good matchmaking is a high level skill (Honig, 1983).

17. The child-care facility is tuned into and plugged into community resources.

Teachers know where to scrounge usable junk if toy money is in tight supply. They know what to do in an emergency situation. Telephone numbers of emergency medical care, parent work places, and referral agencies are clearly visible. Fire drills are held regularly. Community specialists are called in if there are difficult problems, for example, with language delay or frequent biting.

18. Caregivers keep learning child development.

Caregivers are encouraged to participate in ongoing professional training. A center scholarship fund helps teachers take early childhood courses. Caregivers attend professional workshops and conferences. Books and articles can be checked out of the Center library by teachers and parents (for example, Honig, 1982a).

19. Caregivers know and use a lot of positive discipline techniques.

Shaming and hitting are not acceptable in quality programs. Teachers do know how to refocus a wandering child or an upset child on an

interesting activity. They know how to change their voice tones and ask interesting questions to get and keep children's attention. Trained staff know how to listen to body language when children have mad or sad or impulsive feelings that get in the way of their playing constructively or sociably with others. They give children words for their upset and happy feelings. Adults use distraction techniques when appropriate. They use "time out" firmly and calmly when necessary to help a child cool down from an angry acting-out episode. They focus attention first before they restate rules. Teachers use steadying hands, reassuring touches, and trustable voice tones to help children keep self control. Caregivers offer children choices. Staff provide enough toys and activities to prevent and limit fights over possession of materials.

20. The environment feels happy.

Competent caregivers are firm and radiate peaceful intentions. Children in a quality environment rarely act "lost" or uninterested or sullen. As adults create meaningful play possibilities and a caring atmosphere for them, children feel secure and they thrive.

Conclusions

When your survey results in "green light" signals that these twenty characteristics are typical of the child facility you are visiting, then your child, too, will thrive in this quality care environment.

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